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SUBJECT: POPE BENEDICT'S VISIT TO SAO PAULO

REF: (A) VATICAN 85; (B) SAO PAULO 250

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SUMMARY

¶1. Pope Benedict XVI's four-day visit to Sao Paulo, the first trip to Latin America of his papacy, was received with popular enthusiasm and saturation media coverage. In his several sermons and other public utterances, the Pope called on the faithful to adhere to Church rules on personal morality and to push back against the materialistic and secular values promoted by the mass media. In his meeting with President Lula, the Pope spoke of his hopes to reach agreement on a concordat that would afford the Church a special status in Brazil. Perhaps inevitably, his visit intensified the public debate surrounding proposals to legalize abortion in Brazil. Pope Benedict also generated some controversy when, in his address inaugurating the Fifth General Conference of Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean (CELAM), he asserted that the spreading of the gospel during colonization did not represent "alienation of pre-Columbian cultures nor the imposition of a foreign culture." Though Brazilians gave the Pope a hearty welcome and especially appreciated the canonization of a revered 18th century friar, it is unclear to what extent and for how long his message will resonate here. End Summary.

THE ABORTION DEBATE INTENSIFIES

¶2. A crowd estimated at about 15,000 gathered late on the afternoon of May 9 in downtown Sao Paulo in front of the monastery where the Pope was to be lodged. Upon arrival, Pope Benedict appeared on the balcony to deliver brief remarks and a blessing. By then, he had already sparked controversy with comments he made in an interview with traveling press on the plane. Asked about the legalization of abortion in Mexico, the Pope indicated that when some Mexican bishops claimed that deputies who voted in favor of legalization had excommunicated themselves from the Church, this was "not something arbitrary" they were asserting, but

rather a provision of canon law.

¶3. In the days leading up to the visit, the abortion issue was the subject of some intemperate exchanges between government and Brazilian church officials. Health Minister Jose Temporao, accused some sectors of the Church of making "aggressive statements" that were "far from Jesus's teachings." Special Secretary for Women's Policy Nilcea Freire opined that the Church and fundamentalist religious groups should not act as "censors" of public debate. Dom Geraldo Majella, Archbishop of Salvador and outgoing president of the National Conference of Bishops (CNBB), accused the government of promoting promiscuity via its sex education program and by calling for a public debate on legalizing abortion. President Lula split the difference by stressing on the one hand that abortion is first and foremost a public health question (though he as a Catholic personally opposes it) while noting at the same time that the Church is free to make its own decisions and take its own positions. He subsequently indicated that it was up to Congress to decide whether to convoke a plebiscite on the question of legalizing first-trimester abortions, but that his administration would not sponsor such a proposal, as Minister Temporao had proposed. The GoB makes condoms available at no cost as part of its programs combating AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases. Abortion is illegal in Brazil, except in cases of rape or when the life of the mother is endangered by the pregnancy, but an estimated one million clandestine abortions are performed every year, and some experts believe the figure is much higher.

¶4. In the same interview, the Pope also reiterated his low opinion of liberation theology, asserting that "it is now clear that those easy millenarianisms, which promise revolutions and also sudden conditions for a just life, were mistaken. Today everyone knows that." At the same time, he acknowledged that the Church has been losing

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members in Latin America and credited the "sects" (the growing evangelical and Pentecostal denominations) with giving the faithful something they were not getting from the Church, which he said needs to be more dynamic and missionary in its approach. According to a recent Datafolha poll, Catholics now make up about 64 percent of Brazil's population, down from 75 percent in 1994, the first year the poll was conducted. Of those, about one third attend Mass every Sunday. Pentecostals now comprise 17 percent of all Brazilians, and other evangelical groups 5 percent.

CHURCH-STATE RELATIONS

¶5. On May 10, the Pope met with President Lula and with Sao Paulo Governor Jose Serra. Per ref A, the signing of a concordat between Brazil and the Vatican was originally contemplated as a deliverable for this visit, but it soon became apparent that there wasn't enough time to conclude the negotiations. Instead, Lula and the Pope expressed the hope of signing it before the end of Benedict's papacy, or of Lula's presidency (i.e., the end of 2010). The Foreign Ministry is reportedly concerned that certain aspects of the text proposed by the Vatican could violate the principle of separation of church and state and might also, by granting the Church a privileged status, discriminate against other faiths. After the meeting, GoB officials quoted Lula as having told the Pope that, "Our task is to preserve and consolidate the lay state and have religion deal with spirituality and social problems." One point of divergence appears to be a Vatican proposal to make religious education obligatory in public schools. Though the draft agreement reportedly does not mention abortion, many commentators expressed concern that a concordat would increase the Church's influence and thereby strengthen its

hand in opposing legalization.

¶6. The Pope also had a brief ecumenical encounter with a group of religious leaders. Participants included the President of the World Council of Churches, leaders of traditional Protestant (Anglican, Lutheran, Presbyterian) and Orthodox (Greek, Syrian) denominations, as well as Rabbi Henry Sobel of the Sao Paulo Jewish Congregation and Sheikh Armando Hussein Saleh, representing Muslims. Some participants expressed disappointment afterwards that there was not sufficient time for any meaningful or substantive dialogue; the Pope greeted each of the religious leaders and delivered brief remarks on the importance of religions working together in the cause of God. In addition, some observers pointed out that by reaching out to leaders of traditional religions, the Pope was essentially ignoring other important religious communities, especially the vibrant, growing evangelical and Pentecostal movements as well as Afro-Brazilian syncretic religions. Others commented that neither Rabbi Sobel nor Sheikh Saleh can be considered truly representative of the Jewish and Muslim communities.

FAMILY VALUES

¶7. Later the same day, the Pope preached to a crowd of approximately 40,000 young people from all over Latin America assembled in the city's main soccer stadium, with some 15,000 more watching on big screens outside, a smaller audience than expected by organizers. His address was devoted almost entirely to questions of personal morality. Warning that they could become prey to the "assaults of materialism and laicism," the Pope called upon Latin American youth to venerate the family, respect the sanctity of marriage, and practice fidelity and chastity. He also took the opportunity to deplore the environmental devastation of the Amazon region and the "threats to the dignity of its people." The plight of the Amazon is the focus of the CNBB's 2007 Fraternity Campaign.

¶8. The high point of the Pope's visit came on May 11, when he said Mass for some 800,000 faithful - again, fewer than

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the million that organizers had projected, due perhaps in part to the fact that the Mass was broadcast live on television - at an Air Force base in the northern part of the city. He used the occasion to canonize Antonio Galvao, an enormously popular 18th century friar who is the first Brazilian-born person to become a saint. His unusual albeit not unprecedented decision to celebrate the canonization in the new saint's home country instead of in Rome was portrayed by the Vatican as the Pope's special gift to Brazil, making it possible for Frei Galvao's devotees (and the beneficiaries of one of his certified miracles) to be present. In his sermon, the Pope reiterated and expanded on some of the themes from his encounter with youth, calling on the faithful to emulate Frei Galvao and live "clean lives with clear souls and simple intelligence," and to "say no to those media of social communication that make a mockery of the sanctity of marriage and virginity before marriage."

¶9. In a meeting with Brazilian bishops in Sao Paulo Cathedral, the Pope expressed concern for those among the faithful who, due to the fragility of their faith, are most vulnerable to "the aggressive proselytism of sects" and are "incapable of resisting the onslaught of agnosticism, relativism, and laicism." Noting that these are hard times for the Church, he lamented that "crimes against life are being justified in the name of individual freedom; attempts are made against human dignity; the wound of divorce and free unions is festering." He also reiterated the importance of priestly celibacy and stressed the need for a

good spiritual life to avoid "the risk of deviations in the area of sexuality."

¶10. The Pope traveled from Sao Paulo to the national shrine of Nossa Senhora Aparecida in the interior of Sao Paulo state. On May 12, he visited the Estate of Hope in nearby Guaratingueta (Frei Galvao's hometown), a rehabilitation center for the chemically dependent operated by the Church. Here he listened as some of the center's 400 recovering addicts told their life's story. He attributed the phenomenon of drug abuse to "a consumer society turned away from God" and warned that "God will demand satisfaction" from drug traffickers.

ADDRESS TO THE CONFERENCE

¶11. On his last day in Brazil, Pope Benedict said Mass at the Shrine of Aparecida and formally opened the Fifth General Conference of Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean (CELAM). In his inaugural remarks, the Pope called upon the bishops to help the people "suppress the grave social inequalities and enormous differences in access to goods" that inhibit their ability to enjoy a full life "in the most human conditions, free from the threat of hunger and all forms of violence." He praised ecclesial church communities throughout the region for stimulating lay participation in educational and assistance programs, but also expressed concern about "a certain weakening of Christian life in the whole of society...due to secularism, hedonism, indifference, and the proselytism of numerous sects, animist religions, and new pseudo-religious expressions." The Church, Benedict said, is "the advocate for justice and for the poor, precisely by not identifying itself with politicians or with party interests," but rather by maintaining its independence and "teaching great standards and irreducible truths." He criticized both capitalism and Marxism for their failure to appreciate the need for individual morality. He highlighted the tragic legacy of Marxist governments and decried conditions in the western world, "where the distance between rich and poor grows constantly and a disturbing degradation of human dignity is produced with drugs, alcohol, and other subtle mirages of happiness."

¶12. It was in this address that the Pope, in assessing the significance of Christianity's historical pre-eminence in Latin America and the Caribbean, made a comment that he was later obliged to clarify. For the peoples of the region, he said, acceptance of the faith meant "getting to know and

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accept Christ, the unknown God that their forebears, without knowing it, were searching for in their rich religious traditions...In fact, the announcement of Jesus and his Gospel at no time involved an alienation of pre-Columbian cultures, nor was it an imposition of a foreign culture. Authentic cultures are not closed around themselves nor petrified in a determined moment of history, but rather are open and even seek out encounters with other cultures, hoping to find universality in the encounter..." Indigenous leaders, the Brazilian government agency for the indigenous, and NGOs immediately took issue with this formulation, arguing that for many indigenous peoples, Spanish and Portuguese colonization and the Church's participation in it did in fact involve forced conversion and other serious violations of human rights. Venezuelan President Chavez opined that the Pope should ask Latin America's indigenous for forgiveness for the "genocide." Ten days later in Rome, while recalling his visit to Brazil, the Pope tried to mend fences by acknowledging that "The memory of a glorious past cannot ignore the shadows that accompanied the evangelization of the Latin American continent."

ONE BISHOP'S VIEWS

¶13. In the opinion of Auxiliary Bishop Pedro Luiz Stringhini, who heads the Sao Paulo Archdiocese's pastoral programs, the Pope, in stressing family and moral issues as opposed to social questions, was merely recognizing and adapting to generational change. Young people, Bishop Pedro said, are for the most part not as interested in social action as his own generation was. And while taking care of the poor, infirm, elderly, and marginalized populations had always been an important part of the Church's mission, pre-dating Marx by many centuries, the liberation theologians were wrong to frame the social debate in the language of Marxist dialectic. Furthermore, while preaching social revolution was at least understandable when Brazil and much of Latin America were living under military dictatorship, it was less defensible now.

¶14. Liberation theology made an enormous contribution to Brazil, Stringhini acknowledged, by stimulating the formation of the ecclesial base communities that played a major role in opposing the dictatorship and continue to work to ameliorate the plight of the poor, but in the process the Church made the costly error of giving short shrift to the spiritual side of its mission. Referring to the Church's "preferential option for the poor," Stringhini remarked ruefully that "we opted for the poor, and the poor opted for the evangelical churches." The faithful, he said, expected the Pope and other Catholic leaders to act as moral policemen, and would have been disappointed if he hadn't reiterated Church teaching on. Stringhini also noted that unlike the 1968 CELAM meeting in Medellin, this year's CELAM would generate continuity in the Church's profile in the region and not bring about fundamental change.

A SCHOLAR'S ANALYSIS

¶15. According to Fernando Altemeyer, Professor of Theology at the Catholic University (PUC) of Sao Paulo, Pope Benedict won over a great many Brazilians just by showing up. Many among the faithful, Altemeyer said, experienced some trepidation about his visit and his entire papacy, remembering him as the German "Panzer Cardinal" who had disciplined a number of Brazilian and other priests and theologians for straying from orthodoxy, in most cases because they were promoting or defending liberation theology. Though he was certainly no John Paul II, Benedict demonstrated that he was a genuine human being who appreciated Brazilians and Latin Americans. He appeared to speak Portuguese quite well (though Altemeyer noted that for the most part he was actually just reading speeches and sermons), and when he had trouble communicating, he simply

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slipped into Spanish or Italian, and it worked. His message was also generally well received, in part because it was what his audience expected him to say. Many of the young who went to see him were quite conservative - tickets to the stadium event went to youths hand-picked by Church leaders - and appreciated his emphasis on family values.

¶16. That is not to say, Altemeyer noted, that young people practice the sexual morality the Pope preached. Indeed, surveys show that on questions of sexuality and family planning, a sort of mutual "don't ask, don't tell" understanding operates in much of Latin America: Parishioners for the most part don't ask their priests for guidance on such questions, and don't tell them if they are cohabiting or using contraceptives; priests generally don't ask parishioners about the intimate aspects of their lives

and don't tell them they have to abide by rigid rules.

¶17. The reason the issue of a possible concordat sparked concern among Brazilians, Altemeyer said, is that many of the republican leaders who overthrew Emperor Pedro II were freemasons who immediately severed all connection between Church and state. This turned out to be one of the best things that ever happened to the Catholic Church in Brazil, he noted, because the Church was forced to learn how to fend for itself and at the same time was freed from state control. The strict separation has become part of the national psyche. Marriage can be either civil or religious or both, and divorce has been legal for thirty years. While religion should be taught in public schools as part of Brazil's history and culture, Altemeyer argued, even most Catholics do not want to see Catholic teaching as part of the public education curriculum. The Vatican has different kinds of concordats with different countries, Altemeyer said, and it is difficult to know just what the Vatican has in mind for Brazil because the draft document is not publicly available. This inevitably gives rise to speculation, some of it irresponsible.

¶18. The most important thing to understand about Pope Benedict's approach, Altemeyer said, is that he gives priority to quality over quantity. His episcopal motto is "Collaborator with the Truth," and he sees himself and the Church as possessing the single truth, from which he will not permit deviation. If this means there will be fewer Catholics, so be it, so long as the ones who remain in the Church fully accept that truth and follow the Church's teachings and commit themselves to serving God. The Pope doesn't have any problem with Catholics being a minority in many places. In his view, the best way to win lapsed Catholics back and to gain new converts is for the Church to return to its core values. The real problem, in Altemeyer's view, is that Brazil's 18,000 priests - one for every 10,000 Brazilians - are increasingly overstretched and unable to meet the often competing demands of their routine parish functions, social and pastoral work in favelas, hospitals, and prisons, and missionary work to win new souls. The decline in the number of priests is endemic in the Western Hemisphere. One solution, he said, would be to permit volunteer married men to perform certain priestly and missionary functions, but Altemeyer does not expect the Church to adopt such a solution for perhaps another hundred years, and it, and he opined that it will probably take even longer for the Church to accept ordination of women.

COMMENT

¶19. Though the crowds who attended the Pope's public events were smaller than organizers had hoped for, they were nonetheless impressive, and those who were there were generally enthusiastic. There was a "feel good" quality to the entire visit. Much of the criticism that did take place was predictable. For example, Leonardo Boff, an early liberation theologian who eventually left the priesthood after several times being disciplined by Cardinal Ratzinger's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, wrote that the Pope continues to insist on doing battle with modernity, "seeing in it the arrogance of man seeking to emancipate himself through his own strength,"

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without seeking God's help...More than anything he sees in it secularism, materialism, and relativism." Other Brazilians appeared not to enjoy being told how to live their lives. However, many commentators were even-handed, giving the Pope credit for his straight talk and stressing that people were absolutely free to heed him or not, according to their own judgment and the dictates of their conscience. And there is no doubt that a great many Catholics were deeply moved by his presence and his words,

and by the fact that of all the places he might have visited, he chose Brazil. End Comment.

¶20. This cable was coordinated with Embassy Brasilia.

MCMULLEN